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Eradication of poverty and other development issues: women in development

Women in development

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 60/210, the present report focuses on progress made in implementing the resolution, including women's increased participation in government decision-making bodies, and its impact on the eradication of poverty. The report concludes with recommendations for the consideration of the Assembly.

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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 60/210, the General Assembly reaffirmed that gender equality is of fundamental importance for achieving sustained economic growth, poverty eradication and sustainable development and that investing in the development of women and girls has a multiplier effect. The Assembly also expressed its concern about the underrepresentation of women in political and economic decision-making and stressed the importance of mainstreaming a gender perspective in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of all policies and programmes.

2. The General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit to it, at its sixty-second session, a report on the progress made in the implementation of resolution 60/210, including women's increased participation in government decision-making bodies, and its impact on the eradication of poverty. The present report has been prepared in response to that request. The report is based on contributions from Member States in response to a note verbale and inputs received from United Nations entities.[1]

II. Global trends in poverty among women

3. Global trends indicate an overall reduction in poverty since 1990.[2] Although it is widely recognized as complex and multidimensional, poverty is largely measured by income and expenditure data collected through household surveys. Such data are insufficient for understanding the differences in the incidence and impact of poverty on women and men as it does not take into account intrahousehold dynamics, such as distribution of food, income and unremunerated activities, and may lead to an underestimation of the level of poverty experienced by women, including women in non-poor households.[3] An accurate understanding of the gender dimensions of poverty requires gender-sensitive concepts, instruments and methodologies.

4. Although poverty data disaggregated by sex are not consistently analysed and reported at the national level, it is widely estimated that women and girls make up the majority of the world's poor.[4] In 1995, the Beijing Platform for Action

[1] Contributions were received from the Governments of: Algeria, Bangladesh, Belarus, Belize, Chile, China, Colombia, Croatia, Czech Republic, Egypt, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iraq, Italy, Lebanon, Monaco, Montenegro, Peru, Portugal, Qatar, Russian Federation, Senegal, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Thailand, Turkey, Ukraine, and Yemen. United Nations entities providing inputs included: the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Trade Centre/United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)/World Trade Organization (ITC/UNCTAD/WTO), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the World Bank.

[2] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2007* (New York, 2007).

[3] *The World's Women 2005: Progress in Statistics*, United Nations publication, Sales No. E.05.XVII.7.

[4] United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), "Women and Poverty: New challenges", in "Beijing at 10: Putting policy into practice" (Santo Domingo, 2005).

recognized that the number of women living in poverty had increased disproportionately to the number of men, particularly in developing countries and in countries with economies in transition. In many countries this trend has persisted and in those countries a growing number of women continue to experience poverty. In some countries, however, female poverty has been reduced. In Chile, for example, female poverty declined from 39.3 per cent in 1990 to 14.3 per cent in 2006, although it continued to remain higher than male poverty, which stood at 37.9 per cent in 1990 and 13 per cent in 2006.[5]

5. Women's vulnerability to poverty results from a number of factors, including: inequalities in access to productive resources; gender biases in property and inheritance laws; lack of access to education and support services; minimal participation in decision-making; time constraints as a result of unequal sharing of family and work responsibilities; and unequal distribution of resources within the family. This leads, inter alia, to higher rates of malnutrition and anaemia among women and girls in comparison to men and boys from the same families.[6]

6. Gender biases in labour markets and women's lack of control over their own labour and earned income are also major factors in women's vulnerability to poverty. Evidence shows that when women work outside the household, they earn, on average, 20 per cent less than men.[7] Women are also likely to work in more precarious forms of employment with low earnings, little financial security and few or no social benefits.[7] Within the informal economy, women are concentrated in work associated with low and unstable earnings.[8]

7. Inequalities in the labour market, as well as women's disproportionate responsibilities for domestic work, result in a lack of economic autonomy and influence in economic decision-making within households. Recognition of this type of intrahousehold dynamic is important in order to understand the vulnerability of women and girls to poverty, including in non-poor households headed by men.[9]

8. Available data also shows that female-headed households are particularly vulnerable to poverty. For example, in the 2004 review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, Dominica noted that female-headed households constituted 39 per cent of the poor.[10] Although poverty remained concentrated in rural areas in many countries, an increase in urban poverty had occurred in some countries. Brazil reported that the majority of the poorest people lived in urban favelas and Costa Rica reported more poverty among female-headed households in

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[5] Government of Chile, Ministry of Planning, Household Survey 2006.

[6] See United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *En Route to Equality: A gender review of national MDG reports 2005* (New York, 2005).

[7] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *The State of the World's Children 2007: Women and Children: The double dividend of gender equality* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.07.XX.1).

[8] Chen, M. et al, *Progress of the World's Women 2005: Women, work and poverty, Executive Summary*, UNIFEM, New York, 2005.

[9] Godoy, Lorena, *Understanding poverty from a gender perspective* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.04.II.G.7), produced for the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Women and Development Series, No. 52 (Chile, 2004).

[10] See E/CN.6/2005/2.

urban areas.[10] Among older people, the incidence of poverty tended to be higher for women, particularly those living alone.[11]

9. Conflict and HIV/AIDS also increased women's vulnerability to poverty. Conflict has often resulted in higher levels of female-headed households, which can be more prone to poverty. HIV/AIDS has affected a growing number of women, and has increased their responsibilities for caring for the chronically ill and for HIV/AIDS orphans, which limits their ability to work outside the home or to engage in income-generating activities.

III. Enhancing the role of women in development and poverty eradication

10. It is widely acknowledged that gender equality and women's empowerment are central to the achievement of all the Millennium Development Goals. The Task Force on Education and Gender Equality of the United Nations Millennium Project found that women's equal access to resources and opportunities can accelerate economic growth. For example, women's equal access to basic transport and energy infrastructure can lead to greater economic activity; equality in access to farm inputs can increase agricultural production and reduce poverty; and equal investment in women's health and nutrition can reduce chronic hunger and malnourishment, which increases productivity and well-being.[12]

11. The potential for facilitating the eradication of poverty through the promotion of gender equality needs to be harnessed through mainstreaming a gender perspective in economic policies and programmes. When development policies and poverty reduction strategies fail to fully integrate the priorities, needs and contributions of women and are not based on consultation with and participation of women as well as men, their effectiveness is invariably limited. Women must participate fully in the decision-making process in order to ensure attention to gender perspectives is given in poverty eradication processes and the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals.

A. Policies and strategies for development and poverty reduction

12. The national Millennium Development Goal reports and the poverty reduction strategy papers are two instruments through which countries can address both the gender dimensions of poverty and women's role in development. Sectoral policies and strategies, such as agriculture, education and labour, provide further opportunities to focus on poverty reduction, women's vulnerability to poverty and their important role as agents of development.

Millennium Development Goal reports

13. National Millennium Development Goal reports promote awareness, advocacy, renewal of political commitments and capacity-building for monitoring and

[11] *World Economic and Social Survey 2007: Development in an Aging World* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.07.II.C.1).

[12] United Nations Millennium Project, *Taking action: Achieving gender equality and empowering women* (London, 2005).

reporting on progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals.[13] They are instruments for increasing transparency and accountability and create a supportive environment for translating commitments into action and deploying resources where they are most needed. These reports also provide a platform for building partnerships and alliances between development institutions, national governments and civil society groups and an opportunity to engage groups committed to gender equality and women's human rights, with a view to promoting action on critical gender equality issues.[6]

14. A 2005 review of national Millennium Development Goal reports by UNDP stressed that clear reporting on women's vulnerability to poverty and on the linkages between poverty and gender inequality were essential for effective reporting on achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Analysis of reporting on Millennium Development Goal 1 in 78 national reports showed that 42 had made specific mention of women's vulnerability to poverty and 17 had included sex-disaggregated data on poverty indicators. Only 11 reports specifically mentioned the link between women's poverty and gender inequality. Actions to empower women, advance their human rights and reduce gender inequality as strategies for poverty reduction were mentioned in 13 reports. In addition, 15 reports noted targeted interventions for women as part of their national poverty reduction strategies.[6]

15. Many key factors influencing women's vulnerability to poverty were largely invisible in the reporting on Millennium Development Goal 1, including: the linkages with HIV/AIDS; the need to invest in infrastructure to reduce women's and girls' time burdens; the importance of guaranteeing women's and girls' property and inheritance rights; and the elimination of gender inequality in employment. Only two reports referred to intra-family issues such as domestic violence and unequal access to food.[6]

16. Enhanced attention to these areas under the poverty goal in future Millennium Development Goal reports is needed if we are to improve our understanding of the gender perspectives of poverty and its public policy implications. Greater participation of women in the reporting process could facilitate this.

17. National reporting on Millennium Development Goal 3 to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women has addressed the gender gap in education, women in non-agricultural employment and women's political participation, in line with the relevant indicators. A quarter of reports reviewed focused on education because of the linkages between Millennium Development Goal 2 and Millennium Development Goal 3.[6]

18. It has been noted that the indicators for Millennium Development Goal 3 are limited in scope.[6] For example, the indicator on political participation measures the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments. This reflects numerical representation rather than actual power and influence, such as participation in committees and bill sponsorship. It also neglects women's political participation at the local level. A number of countries, however, went beyond reporting solely on women's representation in parliament and included, for example, the percentage of women in local government, the percentage of women serving in cabinet and the percentage of women in civil service/management positions.[6] The reports by Kuwait

[13] United Nations Development Group, *Country reporting on the Millennium Development Goals*, Second Guidance Note (2003).

and Brazil also addressed the patriarchal political culture as a barrier to women's political participation.[6]

19. Nearly two thirds of the reports reviewed covered a broader set of indicators than those on education, non-agricultural employment and political participation. Additional data were provided on stereotypes and discriminatory practices (31 reports), gender wage gaps (25 reports), violence against women (22 reports), legal barriers to equality (18 reports), domestic work and unpaid work (15 reports), access to land and assets (12 reports), negative impacts of economic policies (11 reports) and gaps in the policy framework (10 reports). A few reports mentioned additional challenges, such as limited national capacity for gender mainstreaming (7 reports), women's different level of access to social services (7 reports), male attitudes (6 reports) and the need for institutional change and transformation (5 reports).[6]

20. A joint UNDP/UNIFEM project on gender equality and the Millennium Development Goals piloted innovative approaches for mainstreaming gender perspectives and increasing women's involvement in Millennium Development Goal processes in Cambodia, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Morocco and Peru. In Cambodia and Kenya, the initiative increased women's participation through the involvement of women's groups in policy dialogues, the establishment of a national women's network, district-level poverty dialogues with women and the reflection of women's voices in the Millennium Development Goal information pack for the media.[6] These initiatives increased women's participation in the Millennium Development Goal processes and enhanced the incorporation of women's priorities, needs and contributions into national Millennium Development Goal reporting.

Poverty reduction strategy papers

21. Poverty reduction strategy papers provide an overview of economic and social policies and programmes at the national level to promote economic growth and reduce poverty. The papers are prepared by Governments through a participatory process involving civil society and development partners, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The principle behind this process is that social policies should be oriented towards improving human development for all, including through supporting gender equality, equal opportunities and the elimination of all forms of discrimination. Despite this, poverty reduction policies and programmes continue to neglect gender equality perspectives.[14]

22. UNDP recommends that a gender-responsive national poverty reduction strategy should include the following components: increasing women's access to productive assets and employment opportunities; eliminating gender biases in the delivery of social services and public goods; ensuring the availability of basic survival needs such as drinking water and fuel; and supporting technological innovations that reduce the time burden of domestic work.[6]

23. Gender analysis conducted for a 2004 World Bank desk review of 18 completed poverty reduction strategy papers found that the proportion of papers with extensive diagnosis of gender inequalities had increased from 17 per cent in

[14] Bell, Emma, *Gender and PRSPs: with experiences from Tanzania, Bolivia, Viet Nam and Mozambique*, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, 2003.

2002 to 33 per cent in 2003.[15] In the financial year 2003, about half of all such papers provided sex-disaggregated indicators to measure integration of gender perspectives in education and health and about one third included gender-sensitive indicators to measure progress in governance and labour markets.

24. A number of poverty reduction strategy papers provided indicators to monitor gender-related actions in the areas of infrastructure, agriculture, rural development and financial services. For example, the paper for Mali reported that the percentage of female entrepreneurs and the percentage of women benefiting from microenterprises as indicators of progress. It also proposed training women in rehabilitation and conservation techniques for water and land as part of the infrastructure and the production sector pillar for the papers.[15]

25. Examples of good practice in linking gender analysis and poverty reduction include the poverty reduction strategy papers from the Gambia, Rwanda, Serbia and Viet Nam. In the Gambia's interim paper, it was noted that major factors in poverty among rural women include their predominance in subsistence agriculture, where they have less access than men to mechanized technologies, and the fact that, in addition to farming, they work longer hours than men carrying out household tasks. It was also noted that the lack of basic services in rural areas, such as reliable water supply, health centres and transportation, added considerably to the workload of women. The paper also recognized that the unequal gender division of labour can act as a constraint on women's access to public services. The national strategy therefore focused on promoting labour-saving devices to assist women in their farming, post-harvesting and domestic duties, and on activities to create employment and improve income generation for women.[15]

26. The interim poverty reduction strategy paper on Rwanda is one of the few to include legal issues related to gender equality, including the recent revision of the matrimonial code, which now offers couples the option of common ownership of property assets. In addition, it proposed a new labour code and land legislation to remove restrictions on women's ability to work and own property.[16] The poverty reduction strategy paper for Serbia dealt with the poverty of women as the result of multiple factors and stressed the need for specific measures to enable women to share in the benefits of development.

27. The poverty reduction strategy paper for Viet Nam identified the high dependency ratios of poor and hungry households that are either headed by women or are reliant on women's earnings to meet household needs as a factor in the high rural poverty rate. The paper also recognized the relevance of gender equality issues to both production and reproduction and considered the importance of prioritizing women's access to credit, training and public programmes in microenterprises.[16]

28. Other poverty reduction strategy papers provided an analysis of gender inequalities but did not integrate them into the overall poverty analysis. For example, the paper from Burkina Faso suggested that unequal opportunities in education hold back women's employment prospects. It also drew attention to poor

[15] World Bank, "Implementing the Bank's Gender Mainstreaming Strategy: Second Annual Monitoring Report, Financial Year 2003" (Washington D.C., 2004).

[16] Kabeer, Naila, *Gender Mainstreaming in Poverty Eradication and Millennium Development Goals: A Handbook for Policy Makers and Other Stakeholders*, Commonwealth Secretariat, London, 2003.

health status and the limited availability of health care, lower literacy and limited access to credit. Explicit references to women and girls were confined to sections on education and health, particularly in the context of HIV/AIDS.[16] While the gender analysis was sound, it did not inform the overall analysis and conclusions.

29. In most poverty reduction strategy papers, the promotion of women's participation in government, particularly local government, has not been considered. For example, the paper from Burkina Faso briefly discussed women's participation in national political life and decision-making but it did not examine linkages with governance or poverty reduction.[16]

30. Adequate attention to gender equality in poverty reduction requires increased participation of women in the process. The World Bank facilitated the involvement of women's groups in consultations on poverty reduction strategy papers in a number of countries. In Bangladesh, a "gender platform" was established in 2003, which included representatives of the Government, the World Bank, other donors and civil society. The gender platform developed terms of reference and a gender action plan that was used to negotiate with the inter-ministerial poverty reduction strategy paper task force on incorporating a gender analysis into the completed poverty reduction strategy paper.[15] In Pakistan, a gender dialogue was established with the Government and the Inter-Agency Gender and Development Group to support the active participation of different stakeholders in the drafting of the interim paper. The gender dialogue had a focus on political participation, poverty reduction and strengthening of institutional mechanisms.[15] UNIFEM supported new networks or existing women's networks in advocating for and monitoring progress on Millennium Development Goal and poverty reduction strategy paper processes in Argentina, Brazil, Burundi, Ecuador, India, Mexico, Morocco, Mozambique, the Russian Federation, Senegal, Tajikistan, Uruguay, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), Zambia and Zimbabwe.

31. Women's groups have also successfully participated in and influenced the poverty reduction strategy paper process in other countries. For example, in Kenya, the African Women's Development and Communication Network, FEMNET, and the Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis successfully collaborated on an analysis of the macroeconomic framework of the Kenyan poverty reduction strategy paper from a gender perspective. The findings were used to raise awareness and increase public dialogue on the need to mainstream gender equality at the macroeconomic level.[17]

32. Although the short time frame in Rwanda only allowed for a single round of consultations with the Ministry of Gender, Women and Development, the close relationship between the Ministry and women's organizations in the country gave strength to women's voices and led to a gender analysis of the poverty reduction strategy paper.[16] A workshop was co-sponsored by the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion and the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning and participants included representatives of PROFEMMES/TWESE HAMWE, an umbrella organization of women's civil society groups in Rwanda. Presentations and

[17] Wandia, M., "The Process of Integrating Gender in the PRS Process in Kenya and the Challenges Encountered by the Gender Lobby Groups", quoted in *Guide for Non-economists to negotiate poverty reduction strategies*, Development Assistance Committee Network on Gender Equality (April 2007).

recommendations focused on the importance of integrating gender perspectives into the poverty reduction strategy paper and on identifying operational tools.[18]

33. Although there is a consensus on the need for a participatory approach to the formulation of poverty reduction strategy papers and on the importance of gender mainstreaming, a number of challenges and limitations remain. The participation in the processes is often limited to consultations, which are not always gender-sensitive and are often restricted to a small number of non-governmental organizations.[19] National machineries for gender equality in many countries have low status, are under-resourced, under-staffed and lack access to decision-making processes.[20] As a result, gender equality goals may be perceived as subordinate to other policy objectives. There is therefore a need to open new spaces for women to effectively participate in decision-making on, and implementation of, development policies and strategies. This would also strengthen the capacity of governments to integrate gender perspectives into national poverty reduction policies and programmes. By increasing women's participation and strengthening the focus on gender equality perspectives in the poverty reduction strategy paper process, the important gender-specific barriers to the achievement of development goals and the reduction of poverty can be addressed.

Poverty-focused policies and strategies in other sectors

34. Governments and the United Nations system have implemented a wide range of policies and programmes in different sectors with a strong focus on poverty eradication, including labour, education and training, food security, trade, infrastructure, finance and sustainable development. Many of these policies and programmes are also aimed at enhancing women's role in development, including through strengthening women's participation in decision-making.

35. Many labour market policies and strategies provide opportunities to address the priorities and needs of women and to enhance their participation. Initiatives undertaken include anti-discrimination legislation to address the gender wage gap and women's participation in the labour market (Chile, Colombia, Croatia, Lebanon, Portugal, Qatar and Serbia), the establishment or improvement of childcare centres (Chile, Greece and Italy) and the introduction of flexible working hours (Belarus) and flexible forms of employment (Greece and the Russian Federation).

36. The World Bank's gender action plan, "Gender equality as smart economics" (2006), acknowledged that increasing women's participation in the labour force and increasing their earnings are associated with poverty reduction and economic growth. The plan aims to advance women's economic empowerment in order to promote both more equitable growth and the achievement of Millennium Development Goal 3.

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[18] Zuckerman, Elaine, "Evaluation of Gender Mainstreaming in Advocacy Work on Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs): Synthesis Report" (2002).

[19] Zuckerman, Elaine, "'Engendering' Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs): the issues and the challenges", *in Gender and Development*, vol. 10, No. 3, 2002.

[20] *Report of the Technical Meeting of the National Machineries for Women*, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean-Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee/Canadian International Development Agency, Kingstown, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, 11 February 2004; and CEDAW/C/LCA/CO/6.

37. Income-generating projects targeted at women have promoted the role of women entrepreneurs (China, Italy, the Russian Federation, Serbia and Ukraine) and have increased access to major national markets. Projects have also provided business counselling, product development, microcredit (Algeria, Bangladesh, Egypt and Peru) and capacity-building (Bangladesh, Egypt, Iraq, Italy, the Russian Federation, Senegal, Thailand and Ukraine). For example, Egypt provided training in specialized skills and skills in demand in the labour market, such as those related to new technologies and online marketing and sales, as well as training in the production of local handicrafts.

38. In the design and implementation of its Decent Work Country Programmes and in United Nations country programmes and national poverty reduction strategies, ILO addressed the different needs, priorities and contributions of women and men. ESCAP promoted rural women's entrepreneurship through the formation of cooperatives and capacity-building on the use of information and communications technology (ICT) for product marketing. A pilot initiative, "Women leading for livelihoods", was launched by UNHCR in Kenya and Mozambique. The initiative focused on the economic empowerment of refugee and internally displaced women and girls as a means to improve the well-being of refugee and internally displaced households.

39. Recognizing women's fundamental contribution to food security, agriculture and rural development, FAO worked to reduce gender inequalities in access to and control over productive resources and services and to strengthen women's property and inheritance rights as a means to reduce rural poverty, increase food security and reduce the transmission of HIV/AIDS. IFAD included special provisions for support to women in all new loans it approved in 2006 and in all of its recent country strategic opportunities papers, which are aimed at ensuring that IFAD operations produce a positive impact on poverty. The IFAD policy requires a special focus on women within all identified target groups, with particular attention to women heads of household.

40. Education and training initiatives focused on poverty eradication have included literacy programmes (Egypt), improved vocational education (Bangladesh and Turkey) and efforts to provide women with advice and counselling (Greece). Targeted efforts have also been made to improve education for rural women and girls (Algeria and Bangladesh), especially at the secondary level (Turkey), including through legislation and the elimination of school fees (China). In addition, UNESCO has worked closely with the Ministry of Basic and Non-Formal Education in Niger on the project "Fight against poverty: capacity-building of girls and women in rural areas", which is targeted at reducing poverty through the education and training of girls and women, helping them to build skills for income-generating activities.

41. In 2006, UNESCO organized a round table on "Re-engineering development: engendering ICT" to launch efforts to significantly increase the participation of women in engineering, education and employment in the ICT field within five years. Women made up more than 60 per cent of targeted beneficiaries of the International Trade Centre's trade-led poverty reduction programme, focused on agriculture, textiles, clothing and community-based tourism.

42. Member States reported on efforts to mainstream gender perspectives in international development cooperation (Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Italy

and Monaco). For example, women and development is one of the priorities in the resolution on development policy (2004) of Finland, which encouraged partner countries to assist national gender equality mechanisms and non-governmental organizations to participate in the planning and implementation of national development policies. The Government of Germany reported that its development cooperation programmes addressed: women's equal access to and use of resources and services; barriers that prevent women participating on an equal basis with men in economic activities; and attention to the needs of women in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Germany also reported its commitment, during its Presidency of the European Union, to the adoption of the Conclusions on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Development Cooperation by the Council of the European Union.

43. The Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs continued its work on a comprehensive programme of gender equality statistics to enhance the capacity of countries to collect, analyse, disseminate and utilize gender equality statistics effectively in all policy areas. This is essential for measuring progress in enhancing women's role in development, including through increased participation in decision-making.

B. Women's participation in government decision-making and its impact on the eradication of poverty

44. Women are critical agents of change in development and poverty eradication. Their participation in decision-making is a fundamental human right, as enshrined in the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Political participation is one of the three indicators of progress on the implementation of Millennium Development Goal 3 on gender equality and the empowerment of women.

45. During its sixty-first session, in March 2007, the President of the General Assembly held an informal thematic debate to reinforce the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment as priority issues needing continued attention. The debate, which included interactive panels on the role of women in decision-making at all levels and the economic empowerment of women, including through microfinance, was an opportunity to share views on actions, good practices and lessons learned, to discuss strategies for closing the gap between policy commitments and implementation at national level and to renew political commitments to full implementation of existing agreements.

46. Women's participation in government decision-making has been growing, albeit slowly, during the last decade. As of May 2007, women represented 17.3 per cent of parliamentarians in single or lower houses of parliament and 15.9 per cent of legislators in upper houses or senates, up from 11.7 and 9.8 per cent, respectively, in 1997.[21] As of 1 January 2005, worldwide 4.2 per cent of Heads of State or of Government and 7.5 per cent of presiding officers of parliament were women.[22]

[21] Inter-Parliamentary Union, database on Women in National Parliaments: http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm.

[22] Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Division for the Advancement of Women of the United Nations Secretariat, *Women in Politics: 2005*, poster, Switzerland, 2005.

Research by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) found that women ministers tend to hold portfolios in social affairs (69 per cent) rather than in more powerful ministries such as finance (20 per cent), defence (12 per cent) and economy/development (9 per cent).[22]

47. A number of countries provided information on women's political participation as input to the preparation of the present report. Following the January 2007 parliamentary elections in Serbia, the number of women deputies in the National Assembly nearly doubled, from 12 to 20.4 per cent. In the Hungarian parliament during the period from 2006 to 2010, although a woman speaker was elected (2002-2010), there were no female committee chairpersons. Montenegro reported no women ministers, although a woman held the position of Vice-Prime Minister for the first time. Yemen reported one woman out of 301 members of parliament, a figure that had remained unchanged since 1997.

48. Hungary reported that although nearly 70 per cent of civil servants were women, women were still underrepresented in senior positions. The Czech Republic noted that greater numbers of women participated in political, public and management functions at the lower levels.

49. Data on women in local decision-making available from 78 countries collected by United Cities and Local Governments,[23] an advocacy organization with a membership including individual cities and associations of local governments, indicated that in 2005 20.9 per cent of councillors and 9 per cent of mayors were women. The Slovak Republic reported that, as a result of municipal elections in 2004, more than a quarter of all cities had female mayors. In Hungary, the number and the share of women mayors (14 per cent) and female members in local government representative bodies (25 per cent) was reported to be rising slowly.

50. Many Governments took measures to promote women's political participation at the national and local levels, including through: the use of temporary special measures/quotas (Bangladesh, Colombia, Hungary, Portugal, Serbia and Yemen); the establishment of working groups (Hungary, Lebanon and Qatar); the development of policies, legislation and constitutional amendments (China, Colombia, Lebanon and the Russian Federation); skills-building for women candidates (Egypt and Thailand); provision of information and knowledge to women parliamentarians (Egypt); and efforts to raise public awareness of the issue through conferences and the public media (Belize, Egypt, Hungary and Thailand). In China, women were encouraged to participate in elections and government decision-making, including through the formation of discussion groups on women's participation in local governance at the village level.

51. The United Nations system has also made efforts to promote women's participation in decision-making. For example, the Governing Council of UNEP encouraged the Executive Director to assist Governments in promoting the equal participation of women in policy formulation, decision-making, implementation, monitoring and reporting on sustainable development. The Network of African Women Ministers and Parliamentarians received support from UNFPA in building its capacity on various policy issues.

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[23] United Cities and Local Governments, database on women in local decision-making, available at: http://www.cities-localgovernments.org/uclg/index.asp?pag=wldmstatistics.asp&type=&L=EN&pon=1.

Assessing the impact of women's participation in decision-making

52. Assessing the impact of women in decision-making is more complex than assessing the level of women's political participation. The concept of building a critical mass of women representatives (at least 30 per cent) as essential to women's potential impact on decision-making has proven to be an effective mobilization tool. Most countries, however, have yet to achieve this target.

53. The low level of women's representation, coupled with the relatively short time women have had access to decision-making in most countries, makes it difficult to obtain a meaningful assessment of their impact on the policymaking process. Women do not form a homogenous group and their actions as decision makers are also influenced by their socio-economic class, race, religion, ethnicity and other demographic characteristics determined by age and location. In addition, the indicators commonly used to measure the behaviour of parliamentarians, such as bill sponsorship and voting patterns, represent relative rather than absolute measures of influence.[7]

54. Despite these constraints, initial research has concluded that where women gain access to decision-making, they can and do make an impact in national legislatures and local governments, including on development planning.[7] A survey conducted by IPU among women politicians on the impact of women in politics highlighted three key aspects of women's influence on the political process and government decision-making. First, the survey found that women's motivation to enter politics is strongly influenced by a powerful sense of social justice and an overall desire to make a difference to society. Second, respondents argued that women's involvement enriched and broadened the political process and brought to it new skills, styles and visions, with four out of five respondents believing that women held conceptually different ideas about society and politics. Finally, the survey showed that the overwhelming majority of respondents believed that they had a special responsibility to represent the needs and interests of women, although many stressed their mandate to represent the interests of men, women and children alike.[24]

55. Evidence also suggests that women's participation in government decision-making bodies has improved the quality of governance. Three studies found a positive correlation between increased women's participation in public life and a reduction in the level of corruption.[14] A poll conducted by Gallup and the Inter-American Dialogue in five Latin American countries in 2000 found that most of those surveyed believed that having more women in power improved government and that women were better able than men to handle a wide range of policy issues.[14]

The implications of women's impact on policymaking for poverty eradication

56. Research has shown that, when empowered, women made decisions that positively affected not only themselves, but also the lives of their families and their communities. It has been demonstrated, for example, that economic investments, such as cash-transfer schemes, are far more likely to positively impact the human development of children and families when targeted at women. Similarly, the data have shown that improvements in the health and education of mothers had long-term benefits for the health and education of children, which is an essential component of

[24] Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Politics: Women's Insight*, IPU survey (Geneva, 2000).

long-term poverty reduction.[7] Including women in national legislatures and decision-making bodies could have a similarly positive impact on policy outcomes for children and families and the allocation of resources for development priorities.[25]

57. This impact may be derived from the new perspectives that women bring to decision-making and the new agendas that women decision makers prioritize. Data from the above-mentioned IPU survey suggest that the increased presence of women has altered the traditionally male approach to social welfare, legal protection and transparency in government and business. In particular, it noted that women were more likely to sponsor bills and support decisions that addressed the multidimensional nature of human poverty. In many countries, women have played a critical role in passing laws and developing policies addressing women's and children's needs in areas directly related to poverty reduction.

58. For example, a significant achievement was the 1999 Law on Matrimonial Regimes, Liberalities and Successions in Rwanda, which established, for the first time, women's right to inherit land, with important implications for food production and security. This success was an outcome of an extended debate in which women parliamentarians convinced their male counterparts of the importance of the law.[25] Women parliamentarians in Rwanda have also lobbied for significant increases in the percentage of the national budget spent on health care. The health budget was up from 3 per cent in 1998 to 12 per cent in 2006, with women pushing to reach 15 per cent, in line with meeting the Millennium Development Goals.[25] Another example is the case of Lebanon, where the Minister of Social Affairs, a woman, implemented a programme to assist poor female headed households by providing free school tuition for their children and exemptions from certain taxes.

59. Women have also been instrumental in the development of gender-sensitive budgeting, which aims to ensure that government budgets and the policies and programmes that underlie them address the priorities and needs of women. Uganda's budget initiative, for example, was spearheaded by the Forum for Women in Democracy, an non-governmental organization established by female parliamentarians. The initiative, which brought together women in parliament and other minority groups, encouraged them to go beyond the monitoring of budget allocations and processes to examine the impact of all revenues and expenditures.[26] National mechanisms for the advancement of women have also played a significant role in gender-sensitive budget initiatives. In the Philippines, the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women provided technical assistance to government agencies in devising gender equality plans and budgets.[26]

60. Other examples reveal that women's participation in decision-making processes has had an impact on poverty reduction policies. In Hungary, women's non-governmental organizations, gender mainstreaming experts and civil servants from the ministry responsible for gender equality were members of the monitoring committees of the operational programmes of the new Hungary development plan 2007-2013. In Yemen, in order to reflect gender perspectives in the policies of the

[25] Powley, E. "Rwanda: The Impact of Women Legislators on Policy Outcomes Affecting Children and Families", background paper prepared for *The State of the World's Children 2007* (New York, 2006).

[26] UNDP, *Human Development Report 2002: Deepening democracy in a fragmented world* (New York, 2002).

third five-year plan and the 2003-2005 poverty reduction strategy, the Women's National Committee was represented in the Supreme National Policy Committee.

61. In Peru, anti-poverty round tables provided a new forum in which women could participate in policy processes. In 2002, women represented 60 per cent of all round-table participants, including women from government agencies, local governments and civil society institutions involved in decision-making on activities to be undertaken over the medium- and long-term. An ILO-sponsored programme on gender, employment and poverty assisted the executive secretariat for the national round tables, led by a woman, to incorporate gender perspectives into pilot programmes sponsored by the round tables.[27]

62. At the local level, experience in India has shown that women councillors have had a concrete impact on policy decisions related to local development. For example, in the State of Rajasthan, women councillors articulated women's perspectives on access to water, fuel and health care.[28] Studies in two States of India, Rajasthan and West Bengal, found an unambiguous association between the stated priorities of women councillors, drinking water and roads, and increased levels of spending in these areas.[28] Several studies in India found that women councillors invested more in goods directly relevant to the expressed development priorities of women and children, particularly in drinking water infrastructure, housing, schools and health, and that children in these areas were more likely to be immunized and to attend government day-care centres.[29,12] Such policy outcomes are critical for long-term development and poverty eradication.

63. In Brazil, the city of Porto Alegre implemented a full participatory budgeting process in which thousands of city residents participated in decisions on the allocation of the municipal budget. Women's participation in the process was high, reaching, in 2000, 57.3 per cent of the attending public. In 2002, the involvement of women as delegates of neighbourhood and regional assemblies was as high as 60 per cent, although it must be said that the assemblies were only consultative bodies. In the decision-making sphere of citywide assemblies, the participation of women was only 32.6 per cent.[30]

64. Research also indicated that women in government decision-making placed greater attention on women's and children's rights. For example, a study in Argentina found that in 1993-1994 female legislators sponsored 21 per cent more bills on women's rights and 9.5 per cent more children and family bills than their male counterparts. Similar advocacy by women legislators had been carried out on a range of issues important for women's rights, including child care and parental leave in New Zealand and the United Kingdom and Great Britain and Northern Ireland and equal opportunity legislation in Colombia.[7] Violence against women has also been high on the agenda of many women in decision-making. For example, the Forum of Women Parliamentarians in Rwanda has introduced a draft law that identifies various manifestations of gender-based violence.[25] Action in all of these areas is of importance for poverty reduction. When a woman is empowered, when

[27] CEDAW/C/PER/6.

[28] United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, *Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World* (Geneva, 2005).

[29] Beaman, Lori, et al., "Women Politicians, Gender Bias, and Policy-making in Rural India", background paper prepared for *The State of the World's Children 2007* (New York, 2006).

[30] Centro de Assessoria e Estudos Urbanos (CIDADE): http://www.ongcidade.org.

she can live free of violence, when she is not discriminated against in the labour force, she is able to lift herself and her family out of poverty.

65. Women have also made major contributions in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. For example, in Azerbaijan, Colombia, Liberia, Nepal and Somalia women have worked across ethnic and religious lines to make valuable contributions to peace processes.[31]

66. Women's influence on the decision-making process extends beyond their immediate actions and has an impact on the attitudes of their male colleagues. Research has suggested that male legislators are increasingly aware of the importance of issues related to women and families. For example, in Argentina, Colombia and Costa Rica, there was strong support among male legislators for both women's issues (68 per cent) and family and children's issues (66 per cent).[7] In Rwanda, women parliamentarians worked closely with men on gender equality issues, reflecting the need to convince male parliamentarians that gender sensitivity benefits the whole country.[25]

67. Women in government decision-making can also influence policy processes by providing role models. The presence of women decision makers may encourage other women to raise issues and express their concerns. In India, for example, it was found that the presence of a woman councillor made other women more likely to participate in discussions during the general assemblies, thereby strengthening attention to women's perspectives on development.[29]

Challenges to women's effective impact on policy outcomes

68. Despite the successes reported, the impact of women in decision-making positions often remains constrained. This is partly due to the fact that women in government decision-making have reached the 30 per cent critical mass necessary to bring about significant change in only a very few countries. Women's impact on government decision-making is also determined by factors other than their numerical presence.[7] Women in government often lack the opportunities of their male counterparts in terms of training, access to resources and participation in networks. Even where women are effective in articulating their views, this does not always result in change because of gender stereotypes and institutional and legal frameworks that discriminate against women.

69. An expert group meeting organized by the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women in 2005 identified key factors that enhance women's effectiveness in decision-making and increase their impact on policymaking: (a) identifying and working with critical actors and allies; (b) developing critical mechanisms/structures that strengthen women's influence; and (c) seizing critical junctures or moments where potential to influence the policymaking process is increased.[31]

70. One of the most significant constraints to women's impact on policymaking, including in regard to poverty reduction, is that powerful bodies at all levels dealing with trade, finance and economics have been dominated by men and have been consistently resistant to incorporating attention to gender equality perspectives.

[31] E/CN.6/2006/13.

Women are rarely assigned to work on these committees, tending to work instead on the social sectors, such as education, labour and culture.[32]

71. It is important to acknowledge also that although women in decision-making are more likely than men to represent the needs, priorities and contributions of women, many women decision makers are from elite groups and may have little contact with or information on the situation of poor women. There is still a need for mechanisms to ensure better representation of the interests of poor women in government decision-making.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

72. **It is important to recognize that although women are particularly vulnerable to poverty, they are also critical agents of development and poverty eradication.**

73. **Analysis of national Millennium Development Goal reporting and poverty reduction strategy papers highlighted the missed opportunities to fully identify and address critical gender perspectives and build on the capacity of women in development and poverty eradication efforts.**

74. **Research has shown that increased participation of women in decision-making has a positive impact on development and poverty reduction. Women bring different perspectives and prioritize new agendas that focus on the priorities, needs and contributions of poor women and men and of children. Women decision makers also give greater attention to women's and children's rights and to critical issues such as violence.**

75. **Governments, non-governmental organizations and the United Nations system have made efforts to increase the number of women in decision-making and to build their capacity as agents of change, but accelerated action in this area is required. Women must be empowered to participate actively and effectively in the development and implementation of poverty reduction policies, strategies and programmes.**

76. **The General Assembly may wish to call on Governments, the United Nations system, the Bretton Woods institutions, international and regional organizations, non-governmental organizations, civil society and other relevant actors to:**

(a) **Ensure the explicit incorporation of gender perspectives into the design, implementation, monitoring and reporting of all development and poverty reduction strategies, including through national poverty reduction strategy paper and Millennium Development Goal reporting processes;**

(b) **Develop methodologies, tools and capacity-building to ensure that gender perspectives can be identified and addressed in policy areas where they have previously been neglected, such as trade, infrastructure and finance;**

(c) **Encourage more effective consultation with and participation of national mechanisms for gender equality and women's groups and networks in**

[32] UNDP, *Women's Political Participation and Good Governance: 21st Century Challenges* (New York, 2000).

national policies and strategies, especially in poverty reduction strategy paper and Millennium Development Goal processes;

(d) Promote greater participation of women in government decision-making at all levels and in all policy areas, particularly in areas where they are underrepresented, such as trade, infrastructure and economics, through the establishment of concrete goals, targets and legislated quotas and temporary special measures;

(e) Ensure that women participate at different levels in parliamentary and other committees central to development and poverty reduction and encourage those committees to collaborate effectively with national mechanisms for gender equality and women's groups and networks;

(f) Identify and address the broader constraints to women's effective participation in government decision-making to ensure that the priorities, needs and contributions of women are taken into consideration by, inter alia: providing access to training; developing measures to reconcile family and professional responsibilities; and eliminating gender stereotyping in appointments and promotions;

(g) Conduct in-depth quantitative and qualitative research, including the collection of sex-disaggregated data, on the impact and effectiveness of women in decision-making and their impact on development and poverty eradication, including by identifying and analysing the social and institutional barriers faced by women at the local, national and international levels.